

THE WEDDING FEAST

By MICHELE SAPONARO

We are continuing our series of short stories by authors of various nationalities with a story taken from a country that has a splendid tradition in the art of short-story writing, Italy.

The author was born some fifty years ago in the province of Apulia, which forms the "heel" of Italy. Although considered a very modern writer, he uses a clear and simple language reminiscent of the classical style of some of the best Italian authors of the last century. Most of his stories and characters are inspired by the people of Apulia.—K.M.

THE BIG table been had laid in the hall of the farmhouse. In days gone by this hall had been used for the harvest feast, but in lean times it had been abandoned to the storing of broken barrels, lopsided trestles, and other useless implements, till the good fortune of the new masters had caused it to be replastered and frescoed with village scenes.

It was the custom and tradition of the Casamassima family, on the eve of a wedding day, to gather all the relatives and close friends together at a feast.

Now they were waiting for the young bride, who had gone to her future grandmother to receive the customary blessing. And the bride was late in arriving.

Her delay caused no anxiety to the bridegroom, who walked up and down the long hall, from one side of the table to the other—not because he was impatient but because of his old habit of counting his steps. He had been a land-surveyor for so many years, and he had measured all the farms of the district better with his long legs than with a compass. Every ten or twelve paces he stopped, removed the spent cigar from his mouth and tapped it with his little finger, as if to shake off the ash which was not there.

He was sixty years old, and he had three young oak trees of sons aged thirty, twenty-five, and twenty-one. A widower for some time, he had decided to take a

wife again, because his sons had told him that a woman was essential to the home and one could not remain a widower at sixty. He had replied that being a widower did not bother him, and in any case what was needed at home was an elderly person, not that young girl they wanted to give him.

The youngest son had been the first to ask his father to remarry. Of the three, he was the poor shepherd, while the other two looked after the cattle, the granary, and the accounts. He had asked him with that innocent manner of his, and stood looking spellbound at the girl every time he went to call on her with his father. If the father was going to marry her, he would no longer have to walk so far and so often to look at her.

The other two had observed the expression on their younger brother's face and had caught each other's eyes in a furtive, sidelong glance, each betraying to the other his secret thoughts. It had been on an evening in July, among the sheaves ranked diagonally like the tents of a vast encampment. There was a low, reddish moon on the horizon, a disk with no halo of light, and a distant fire of stubble threw conflicting lights and shadows onto the scene of houses and dense vegetation.

They said nothing to one another, but they had followed up their brother's request: also from motives of personal interest, for they knew their wealthy old

grandmother was very fond of the girl, who was distantly related to her. The eldest son had been particularly imperious, and the father always obeyed his eldest son.

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Now, while the father waited for the bride who did not appear, he was not impatient; but his sons were impatient in the extreme.

Pietro, who when arguing always said he wanted to break open someone's head; Pietro, who had once boasted of freeing himself from three assailants and, with a round of blows, sending them into a ditch to keep the frogs company; Pietro, who was renowned for having broken many a heart; Pietro the first-born was sitting with his legs apart in front of a pitcher of wine. From time to time, following his thoughts with a gesture, he raised his fist threateningly behind his father's shoulders.

Paolo, the second son, was sitting with his elbows planted on the table, moving only his eyes to follow the footsteps of his father back and forth, like a hypnotized cock following the line marked out for it under its beak.

Giovanni, the youngest, was standing on the threshold, casting his gaze yonder to the end of the path, his hands visor-like over his eyes. Then he turned round and said to the others, but in a low voice as if he were talking to himself:

"Grandmother, you know how she is, she is upset and won't let her come."

He added: "It is more than half a mile to here. Once I counted the paces—nine hundred of them. Tetti, with her little steps, will take at least ten minutes. Now she will be halfway, and in five minutes she will be here."

Once he said, giving a start of joy: "Perhaps Grandmother will come too?"

Their grandmother, who was almost ninety, could not move from the house: she had not even gone out the day their mother had died.

Then it occurred to all of them that they had not thought of their grand-

mother, that they could still have the feast at her home, and that, if she did not have a big room for the long table, they could divide up the banquet in all the rooms. The innkeeper, who had spent the night running between stoves and cooking-pots in order to cover himself with glory, dripping with sweat and utterly exhausted, stammered that they ought to have thought of that sooner, that now it was impossible to make over the program, that the dinner was already getting cold in the pots, that all his labor was being ruined. Really, it was an insult to him, such disorder.

"Why don't you go and fetch her in the cart?" he said, fuming and puffing in his rage, almost as if he would have put himself to the cart, like a colt anxious to break into a gallop.

The guests were beginning to arrive. The men, in stiff collars and their hair shiny with pomade, exchanged violent handshakes and then stood around bolt upright without knowing what to say to each other. The women looked for a mirror to tidy up, and in the mirror they exchanged mysterious signs, nodding and pursing their mouths as if they wanted to sew them up. They all contracted their nostrils as if to smell something which was not only the odor of roast or ragout. They sensed the air of a scandal about to break.

Then Pietro got up, putting aside the pitcher of wine which now seemed like poison to him:

"I am going to walk over there," he said, and went out.

"I'm going too," said Paolo the second son, wrenching himself out of his hypnotism, and followed his elder brother. It was the pact, and they would not be separated.

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Their grandmother's house was situated at the end of a garden, almost hidden among the branches of a luxuriant vine. During the night it had rained a great deal, and the water outside the garden had collected into a broad puddle. They had to go a long way round, one behind

the other, to reach the lattice gate. From the gate to the house the path was firm, and on the path were to be seen only the marks of two wheels which had recently passed. The elder paid no attention to them: Paolo stared at them and tried to follow them with his eyes, but the traces disappeared in the stagnant water, and beyond the water it was impossible to distinguish them in the high grass of the field.

They went in. The entrance hall was empty, and from the room beyond, which seemed plunged in silence, came only a subdued stirring.

Before reaching the door and without seeing his grandmother, Pietro asked: "Where is Tetti?"

Their grandmother, bent toward the wall, put her hands down into a wooden chest which smelled of old, wormeaten wood and withered quinces. She did not turn round, nor did she reply.

"Grandmother," Pietro went on, "Tetti came here to pay her respects to you. Where has she gone?"

The old woman said in her little, threadbare voice, but without turning round:

"She did pay her respects to me, and I enjoyed seeing her. I gave her my blessing and my wedding gift."

"But you know where she has gone."

"Look for her."

Pietro swayed back and forth on his toes and heels, turning between his hands the gold chain that hung across his waistcoat. He was a giant, and standing straight in the opening of the door he seemed to fill it entirely, body and shadow.

"Father has sent us to look for her. Father is waiting for his bride."

Then the old woman turned round. She had a proud face which robbed the arrogant fellow of words. She was not a beautiful old woman, for long suffering and arthritis had shriveled and consumed her face, but she must certainly have been a beautiful young woman. And

now, when pride was imprinted on her witch-like face, it seemed to send forth a gleam of youth.

"Your father?" she said. "Your father has had his wife, and she was my daughter. He did not want this one, and you have thrust her upon him."

"She is a good girl. What have you against her?"

"Good, and honest, and beautiful. But your father did not want her. He had no need of her."

"The house has need of her. A house cannot exist without women."

Pietro was the only one to speak. Paolo stood at his shoulder, silent, but he seemed to be prompting him.

"You have need of her. Both of you have need of her. And you want to marry her to your father for your pleasure. One of you alone did not want to marry her, because there would have been blood spilled. And you will divide her between you as one divides a melon. You will eat at the same table. You have made a pact. But it is a pact of the Devil. And what will you get if you take the woman? You will not have the dowry, for that will belong to the husband."

"Father is the husband."

"But he has not married her yet."

Then the brothers came forward together, elbow to elbow.

"Grandmother, what do you mean? What are you planning?"

"What is this talk about the dowry?"

"And what has that to do with us, the dowry?"

The great hands of the giant, although they did not tremble, seemed to be afraid of approaching the old woman, and they continued to count the links of the gold chain across his waistcoat. The brother kept his hands deep in his trouser pockets. But the trembling hands of the old woman were not afraid, and her forefinger pointed first at one, then at the other of her grandsons.

"This talk, as you call it, is simply that Tetti has taken the dowry. Everything I had."

And she pointed to the empty chest.

"She is a thief!" roared the two grandsons with one voice.

"I gave it to her. Did I not have the right to give it to whoever I pleased? You are the sons of my daughter, and you will have the legitimate dowry; but my possessions I have given to Tetti . . . There is nothing left. I even gave her the fine linen too. That lovely fine linen that never wears out. I have given her everything. I said to her: 'Go far away. Here there are wolves who want to eat you. Here your life will be a torment, always in mortal sin. Your husband's sons will want your bed. And a bed for three is full of thorns. Blood will flow. Go far away. Hide. Go to a place of safety. Search for a safe house. Go to the Sisters; they will defend you till such time as a man comes along who will defend you himself. Find a husband of your own age, for it is not good to marry a man who could be your father.' This is what I said to her. And now that you know you can go back to your dinner."

Pietro felt that if he did not escape he would strangle the old woman: and he went out stamping like a mule. Paolo seemed meeker and more resigned, but the glances he cast where those of the wounded fox that will return when its wounds are healed. He followed his elder brother.

On the way they met Giovanni, who was coming to join them. They stepped aside to let him pass without speaking to him. But then, so as to seem cheerful, Pietro smiled and, turning, said:

"Go on, go on, so that that ugly old witch can tell you her secret."

And she did tell him. His grandmother was glad to see him, but she started with surprise, for she did not expect him so suddenly, as if by a miracle of the Lord's.

"Tetti is not here. Didn't your brothers tell you?"

"They didn't tell me, but I guessed as much. What has happened, Grandmother?"

"Are you sorry not to see her here?"

"It is as if you had taken the picture of the Madonna and turned it to the wall, just like that."

Then the old woman told Giovanni where she had sent Tetti. If he went by train, they would arrive together. He could still marry her, because with his father the Sacrament had not yet taken place. And weddings are for young people. But he must go far away, out of the district, they must take ship somewhere. Hawks have long claws . . .

Raising her head, she looked her grandson full in the eyes, almost threateningly, as if to instill in his heart her own ancient pride:

"But you are a hunter, and you will know how to defend your wife even against hawks."